

OBSERVATIONS OF A BROWN FALCON *FALCO BERIGORA* KILLING A DUGITE *PSEUDONAJA AFFINIS*.

By V.M. SAFFER

Biological Sciences, Murdoch University,
Murdoch 6150. W.A.

INTRODUCTION

The Brown Falcon *Falco berigora* is common and widespread throughout Australia, particularly in open habitats (Marchant & Higgins 1993). It is less aerial than other falcons and is usually seen perched on exposed branches, telegraph poles and fence posts, often near roads, searching for prey (Blakers *et al.* 1984; Marchant & Higgins 1993). It will take prey in the air, occasionally from trees, but more often on the ground (Blakers *et al.* 1984; Marchant & Higgins 1993). Brown Falcons will not chase their prey in the air. However, they are active and agile on the ground and, if an initial strike misses, are prepared to chase prey on foot (Hollands 1984; Marchant & Higgins 1993). The prey is usually eaten on the ground or perch.

The Brown Falcon is an opportunistic feeder whose diet includes a variety of invertebrates, mice, rats, some small birds, occasionally young rabbits, lizards and snakes (Hollands 1984; Barker & Vestjens 1989; Marchant & Higgins 1993). Reports of the diet of the Brown Falcon, from direct observations and gut analysis, have come mainly from New South

Wales, Victoria and Tasmania. These reports include a variety of snakes in the diet of the Brown Falcon, even the larger species such as Brown Snake, Copperhead and Tiger Snake. Barker & Vestjens (1989) detail three species of *Pseudonaja* taken by the Brown Falcon in Western Australia but these species are usually only found in the north of Western Australia (Storr *et al.* 1986).

Dugites *Pseudonaja affinis* are found in the south of Western Australia and are common in their area of distribution (Storr *et al.* 1986). They grow up to 2.0 m long and are one of Australia's deadliest snakes. It has been suggested that the long legs, scaly feet and densely feathered chest of the Brown Falcon help protect it when preying on venomous snakes (see Marchant & Higgins 1993). This note describes the killing of an adult Dugite by a Brown Falcon in the Fitzgerald River National Park in Western Australia.

OBSERVATION

At approximately 1600h on 7 November 1994, on Devil's Creek Road in the western part of the

Fitzgerald River National Park, an adult Brown Falcon was seen in the roadside vegetation, flapping its wings and grappling with a Dugite. The falcon had a secure grip on the snake with its right foot, just behind the snake's head, and dragged it across the gravel road immediately in front of my vehicle. The snake was still alive, its open mouth within millimetres of the falcon's belly at times, and writhed as it was dragged across the road and into the vegetation. After a few minutes, the falcon lunged with its mouth at the head of the snake, which did not move thereafter. The falcon then dragged the snake further into the vegetation (Figure 1). The entire procedure lasted no more than ten minutes, the falcon continually looking in the direction of my vehicle.

The falcon flew off and perched in a tree about 20 metres away,

whereupon I retrieved the snake. It measured 115cm from the severed head to the tip of the tail, with a maximal circumference of 14 cm. The head was absent but except for a single wound 30 cm from the tip of the tail, the rest of the body appeared intact. The wound, irregular in shape and no more than 3cm long, was presumably made by the talons possibly on first impact. Other than the injuries described, the snake appeared in relatively good condition. It was placed back in the vegetation, the falcon remaining in the tree until after my departure. At about 0500h next morning a small (± 40 cm) section of snake was sighted on the road in the area.

REFERENCES

BARKER, R.D and VESTJENS, W.J.M. 1989. *The food of Australian*



Figure 1. Brown Falcon dragging a Dugite into the vegetation. (Drawn from a photograph by VMS)

- birds. I. Non-passerines.* CSIRO Division of Wildlife and Ecology, A.C.T.
- BLAKERS, M., DAVIES, S.J.J.F. and REILLY, P.N. 1984. *The Atlas of Australian Birds.* Melbourne University Press and Australian Ornithologists Union, Melbourne.
- HOLLANDS, D. 1984. *Eagles, Hawks and Falcons of Australia.* Thomas Nelson Australia, Melbourne.
- MARCHANT, S. and HIGGINS, P.J. (eds) 1993. *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic birds. Volume 2. Raptors and Lapwings.* Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- STORR, G.M., SMITH, L.A. AND JOHNSTONE, R.E. 1986. *Snakes of Western Australia.* Western Australian Museum, Perth.